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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000343

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/BCLTV, DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PHUM SOCI PREL PGOV KIRF VM ETMIN HUMANR RELFREE

SUBJECT: REPORTS OF HOUSE CHURCH CLOSINGS, BEATINGS, AND
PROTESTANT HARRASSMENT IN KON TUM AND QUANG NGAI PROVINCES

REF: A) 03 HCMC 0450 B) 03 HCMC 0833

11. (SBU) Summary: Three new Protestant contacts, introduced by a trusted HCMC-based source, shared information on several recent incidents in Kon Tum and Quang Ngai provinces with Poloff in two meetings in HCMC on March 31. At the first meeting, two lay pastors provided firsthand accounts of house church closings and beatings in Kon Tum. Later that evening, an ethnic minority pastor from Quang Ngai gave Poloff secondhand reports of the more generalized harassment faced by his followers. End Summary.

12. (SBU) Protestant lay pastor Nguyen Khac Xuan (protect), an ethnic majority Kinh Vietnamese, told Poloff that he was attacked on March 24, 2004 at 8:40 p.m., while returning home on his motorbike after a prayer meeting at his Dak Kum house church in Kon Tum City. As he neared his home, a man wearing a mask blinded him with a flashlight, and then attacked him with a stick, beating him on both arms and one leg. Another man tried to attack Mr. Xuan's wife, who began screaming loudly. Mr. Xuan fled the scene and managed to evade his attackers. He reported the attack to the local police, who told him the attackers were probably just trying to steal his motorbike. Even one week after the alleged attack, Poloff was able to observe noticeable bruise marks and fresh scabs on both arms and his right leg.

13. (SBU) Mr. Xuan also reported that on March 14, 2004, local police interrupted services at his Dien Binh house church in Dak To District, Kon Tum. One week earlier, Mr. Xuan had baptized 14 new converts at the church. The police seized their Bibles and other worship materials, and made a record of all the items taken. The police then brought Mr. Xuan, his wife, and the house's owner to the district police station, and informed them that Protestants were not recognized in Kon Tum. On March 19, police again summoned Mr. Xuan to the district police station. A Major Tran Duc Long and other police officers then took him back to Dien Binh, and tore down Christian banners hanging inside the house. According to Mr. Xuan, the police forced him to admit to committing two offenses -- assembling a large group together and organizing illegal worship. He was fined 1.5 million Vietnamese dong (about US\$100) and warned that he would face larger fines and possible imprisonment if he continued these activities. Major Long also reportedly threatened Mr. Xuan that local Christians, many of whom do not have household ownership books, would be kicked out of their homes if they continued to worship.

14. (SBU) Mr. Nguyen Ksor Lai (protect), a Ja Rai (Gia Rai) ethnic minority Protestant lay pastor, told Poloff he was summoned to the district police office in Sa Thay District, Kon Tum on March 8, 2004, and ordered to sign a document saying he would stop gathering Protestants together in his village. Three elderly followers had apparently been threatened with imprisonment and pressured into revealing him as their pastor. Mr. Lai stated that his church attracts almost 100 worshippers every Sunday. When Mr. Lai refused to sign the police document, he claimed police beat him on his chest and sides until he fell down. He also reported that police tried to force him to renounce his faith, and admit that he had lied in a letter he sent to the government in 2003, alleging physical abuse and violations of religious freedom. Mr. Lai and three of his church leaders were brought back to the police station on March 10, where they were again ordered to sign the document promising to cease worship services in the village. When they refused, Mr. Lai claimed they were all beaten. He said this happened a third time, on March 11, with three different followers. One member of this last group, Mr. Ksor It (protect), was told to stand next to a statue of Ho Chi Minh, where police asked him: "Who do you believe in, Jesus Christ or Uncle Ho?" When Mr. It answered, "Jesus," police allegedly beat him until his leg bled. Mr. Lai told Poloff that all seven Protestants had finally agreed to sign a document agreeing not to meet, although they planned to continue meeting anyway. He said that nobody signed a renunciation. On March 15, Mr. Lai's wife was called to the police station, where police told her to sign a document renouncing her faith. She refused, and sat waiting in the police station with no food or water for several hours until she fainted.

15. (SBU) Pastor Dinh Tan Vinh (protect), an ethnic Hre Protestant who claimed to lead 101 house churches with 5,800 believers in Quang Ngai Province, told Poloff of several incidents involving his followers in Son Tay District, Quang Ngai. In late 2003, local authorities reportedly kicked Mr. Dinh Van Hoang (protect) out of his village near Son Tinh, burning down his house and

forcing him to move to another district. In early 2004, police allegedly slaughtered the livestock of three new Protestant families in the same village and forced them to engage in "idol worship." (Note: According to Pastor Vinh, "idol worship" includes the traditional animist ceremonies of the Hre people.) On March 20, 2004, the adults from two of these families were ordered to report to the district police station, where they were allegedly told to renounce their faith. They were then ordered to work in the police garden for five days and fined 400,000 Vietnamese dong (about US\$25) per couple. Mr. Dinh Van Tru (protect), a lay religious worker, apparently heard of their detention and walked 40 kilometers to check up on them. Within an hour of his arrival, he was allegedly detained by local police chief Dinh Van Hanh, fined 100,000 Vietnamese dong (about US\$6.50), and beaten by four police officers for four hours. Mr. Tru then "escaped" into the jungle and managed to walk the 40 kilometers back home that same day, where Pastor Vinh said one of Mr. Tru's eyes was swollen shut from the beating. Pastor Vinh repeatedly accused Mr. Cao Trung Tin, Communist Party chief of Son Tay District, of having directed these incidents. Pastor Vinh alleged to Poloff that Mr. Tin has ordered local authorities to remove all Christians from his district, by any means necessary.

16. (SBU) Comment: These new allegations are troubling, if true, but not terribly surprising in the context of Protestant activities in Kon Tum Province. ConGenoffs have traveled to Kon Tum several times over the past year (reftels), and find the provincial leadership there to be either ill-informed or almost completely out of step with GVN policies on religion, especially with regard to Protestants. In fact, the statements by the local police that Protestants are still not recognized matches what we have heard directly from the chairmen of the Kon Tum Provincial People's Committee and Committee on Religious Affairs on previous trips.

17. (SBU) These three Protestants were brought to HCMC by one of our most trusted contacts, in direct response to our continued requests for meetings with firsthand sources. Of the three, Mr. Xuan provided the clearest and most concise account. Mr. Lai's account tended to go off track a bit, but still demonstrated firsthand knowledge. Both men asked that the USG not/not raise their cases with GVN officials unless and until church leaders in Vietnam had decided to go public with their stories. Our local contact said that his organization was planning to release a report over the Internet on at least the Dien Binh incident.

18. (SBU) Pastor Vinh's story, on the other hand, was inconsistent and filled with the sort of accusations and unconfirmed allegations typical of second and third hand accounts. Many of his claims were based on things he had merely "heard." Pastor Vinh offered nothing to substantiate his claims that these incidents were directed by the local Communist chief -- just that he had "heard" this story.

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